The Saga of Trials and Tribulations: A Study of the Novels of the North-East India

With special reference to;

Indira Goswami

Siddhartha Deb

Mitra Phukan

Srutimala Duara

A SYNOPSIS

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Yes, I have seen our fields
turn into factories and mills
and green hills
reduced to barren brown,
Our rivers have dried
and once sparkling fish
lie dead on the sandy banks
It's no more the pines, I can smell
Nor hear the Tragopan and the Hornbill[1]

The above lines by Monalisa Changkija reflect the state of her home land, the eastern most part of India having international borders with a unique picture of culture, tradition and customs, i.e., 'North-East India'. India embodies within her fold a pluralistic, multilingual and multiethnic society and North-East India makes a rich addition to this feature displaying numerous colours of customs, traditions and languages. It is connected to the East India through a narrow corridor squeezed between Bangladesh and Nepal. North-East India is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions of India. It has emerged from the great traditions of the Indic Asia and Mongoloid Asia and comprises seven states also known as 'The Seven Sisters' namely Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Manipur. These states are famous for their unique patterns of culture and traditions for which they stand apart from rest of the country.

These states represent their uniqueness in terms of culture, tradition, language and ethnicity of history, physicality, cuisine, dress and the ethos of life. Their festivals, food, modes

[1] Changkija, Monalisa. Ed. Indu Swami.*Exploring North-East Indian Writings in Engish Vol.1.* New delhi: Sarup Publications Pvt. Ltd. 2011.48. Print.

of celebration, everything is distinct. The region is a home of various tribes, namely, Khasi, Garo, Jantia, Aka, Tangsha, Adis, Wancho, etc. to name a few. People here worship nature and they believe that the survival of mankind depends entirely upon nature. Keeping in view their oneness with nature, Margaret Ch. Zama aptly remarks:

> The great variety of people of the North East survived through the centuries because they were one with ecology, and developed their own indigenous knowledge systems to sustain both themselves and the environment that accommodates them.[2]

North-East India is also a mark of scenic magnetism, beautiful hills, rivers and greenery, rather all the attributes of positive nature which make this region a charming segment with great appeal.

Despite such a rich character of cultural heritage, tradition and beauty, people here are living in the politically, socially and economically troubled atmosphere. These problems act as a great hindrance in the growth and progress of this region. Remoteness from the rest of the country in terms of geographical demarcations is also a drawback for the development and progress of this region. This remoteness characterized by high mountains, impenetrable forests and raging rivers, has proved to be, a curse in disguise. It has given rise to multi-faceted problems like, inadequate development in terms of transportation, lack of proper opportunities of education, abject poverty emanating from colossal corruption and scanty employment

[2] Zama Margaret.*Marg A magazine of Arts. Vol 63. No.4* Mumbai: Marg Foundations, Jak Printers Pvt. Ltd. 2012.Print.14

opportunities as a result of little industrial progress. The points mentioned above can be substantiated by quoting Mitra Phukan who says:

> For the isolation of many of these areas, and the fact that such instruments of modern "progress" such as the television which serve to homogenize civilizations, arrived comparatively late to this region, have ensured that their inter intra region uniqueness of the places here have remained inviolate for a long time.[3]

The problem of identity crisis is also one of the major sources of concern for the people of the North-East. As people here are different by their outward appearances, exclusive traditions and festivals, they are often seen as outsiders in their own country. When their quest for identity is not fulfilled, it gives rise to their demand for a separate land which further leads to issues like ethnic clashes, formation of Insurgent groups, etc. This gives impetus to and become a cause for violence, kidnappings, bloodshed and devastation of peace and serenity.

As the region shares International borders with countries like Bangladesh, Tibet and Nepal migration and subsequent problems like violence, corruption and ethnic clashes have become inevitable. According to the Government consensus of the year 2001, 3,084 people migrated from Bangladesh to India. The policy of nonchalance exercised by the regimes, both the Central and the States, is also a major factor acting as an obstacle in the progress of this region. Corruption is deeply embedded in the system here and the exploitation of the rich natural

[3] Phukan Mitra.*Asomiya Handpicked Fiction* .New Delhi: Katha Publishers.20111. Print. 8

resources by both the government as well as private agencies is also a cause for failure in the development of this region resulting in agitation of the local people.

Numerous factors have contributed to the ravaging of the beauty, culture and life of the region as in search of a safe and prosperous life, people are gradually falling apart from their age old rituals and traditions. In addition to the above mentioned snags in the path of peace some of the other major issues troubling the society of this region are poverty, suppression, feeling of alienation and discrimination.

However, despite the land being infected with various issues disturbing the lives of the people the preservation of remarkable art and culture as well as the richness of literature, are still amazing aspects of this region. Regional Literature here encompasses myths, legends, folklores, songs, music and dances of the area. They narrate the tales or legacies of traditions which are carried down from generation to generation, cherished and considered as immensely sacred. These oral traditions form the basis of most of the modern literature produced from the North-East.

Today, the writers from this region are recognized throughout the country for their works which reflect their advancements in the literary fields. But the journey from the state of near oblivion to the present state of recognition has not been an easy one. Although the region can easily claim for a deep-rooted tradition of Literature and folklore, it is only in the last few decades that their splendid potential has been realized. In all its manifestations, the literature of the North-East demonstrates such effective picture which predominantly projects the troubled existence and hopelessness of the regional lot. The works of the North-East reflect the trauma of

a society in transition. The modern writers write with a sense of longing about the rich and unifying traditions of the past and lament over the chaotic development of the present.

These writers most vehemently raised the voice against various problems prevalent in these regions. They have talked about the issues which are disturbing the peace of their beautiful homeland with a hope to bring changes in the society. They talked about the sufferings of the people which are deeply embedded in the social system. The trials and tribulations of the people of the North-East India are clearly revealed by these writers through their novels, short stories, poetry and prose. Fiction is an effective genre through which the realities are clearly depicted by the writers of the region. In fact, many short stories and novels have their origin in the incidents that have been witnessed by them. The authors selected for the proposed study are Indira Goswami, Siddhartha Deb, Mitra Phukan and Srutimala Duara.

Indira Goswami (1942- 2011), known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, was an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar and writer. She was the winner of the 'Sahitya Akademi Award (1983)', The Jnanpith Award (2001), and 'Principle Prince Claus Laurate (2008). A celebrated writer of contemprory Indian Literature, some of her famous novels are, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988), *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001) and *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005), *Ramayan from Ganga to Brahmputra* (1996), *The Blue Necked Braja* (1976) etc. She was well known for her attempts to bring social change, both through her writings and her role as a mediator between the armed militant group, The United Liberation Front of Assam and the Government of India. The main features in Goswami's writing have been the focus on women and the cultural and the political construct of the Assamese society.

In her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988) she clearly brings out the various facets of the male dominated society, through the ordeals of the leading protagonist Giribaala. Goswami effectively talks about the social flaws disturbing the lives of the people of this region. She focuses on the troubles of people which they face due to the narrow and conservative social systems.

At the peak of her literary career, she wrote her most controversial novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005). In this book she writes against the thousand year old tradition of animal sacrifice in the famous Hindu Shakti temple of Kamakhya, the mother goddess, in Assam. In this novel, she quotes scriptures to authenticate the arguments she puts forward in the novel, i.e., to worship the goddess with flowers rather than blood. She was highly criticized by the dogmatic clerics and the conservatives but she was capable in bringing about changes in the mindset of the young generation which supported her and stood by her in her protest to stop animal killings for religious rituals. In all her novels she tries to pinpoint the evils plaguing the society so as to preserve the rich cultural heritage of that region.

Born in Meghalaya, spending the formative years in Shillong, Siddhartha Deb (1970-) was given the PEN/Open book award in 2012 for his book *The Beautiful and the Damned (*2011). He has also contributed to the *Boston Globe, The Guardian, The Nation, The New Statesman, Harper's The London Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement.* He currently teaches creative writing at the New School in New York. He has written two novels entitled *The Point of Return* (2003) and *Surface* (2005).

Set in a fictional hill-station, closely resembling Shillong, his debut novel *The Point of Return* is a semi-autobiographical novel. A rambling debut by Deb, it concerns the troubled

recent history of his homeland, seen through the eyes of a young man whose father fled Pakistan as a refugee. The novel revolves around Doctor Dam, a Hindu Veterinarian, whose family had lived for generations on a farm in East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh). After the Partition, Dam settled in the neighbouring Indian state of Assam, bringing his father and three of his brothers along with him. Trained under the British, Dam thought of himself as a public servant above all else, and soon became a significant figure in local government, organizing farmers, cooperatives and working out programmes for the effectual harvesting and distribution of milk and crops. The tale mirrors larger struggles (poverty crisis, religious conflict, official neglect, etc.) that faced India, as well as the archetypal generation gap that makes father and son struggle.

In his another novel *Surface* too, he brings out the socio-political crisis prevailing in the country. He brings out the truth related to the various rebel groups working in the North-Eastern parts of the country. He introduces the readers to the real life scenario as he travels to Manipur and describes the place as having the highest rate of illiteracy and unemployment in the region, rampant drug use, promiscuity, AIDS and regular violence with government personnel as well as ethnic clashes. Thus in both his novels, Deb brings out socio-cultural and political crisis affecting the lives of common people along with showcasing the sufferings due to corruption and violence.

Mitra Phukan is also an Indian English writer from the North-East region. She has written several books for children, and also won the UNICEF-CBT Award for children's writing for her book *Mamoni's Adventure* (1986). She recurrently contributes to *The Assam Tribune,* and is a prominent member of the North East Writers' Forum. Besides, she is also a translator and a columnist. She is the author of *The Collector's Wife* (2005) and is one of the most prominent literary voices in English from the North-East India.

The novel is set against the Assam Agitation of the 1970s and 80s. The violent insurgency that grips Assam, runs like a dark river through the novel and forms its backdrop. The Assam students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s that began as a movement for the self-determination is shown to have grown in a full blown insurgency; kidnappings, extortion and political instability have become the order of the day. It also shows that the issue of illegal migration from across the border has spread mistrust and bitterness among the people of the region.

Her novel, *A monsoon of the Music* (2011), too displays the flaws and tormenting issues present in the social system of this Region. Phukan presents loss of values and growing complexity and diminishing values and sanctity of relationships in the present world. The internal as well as the external crisis which the characters go through is clearly revealed by the novelist. The novel depicts the minute details concerning the society and presents lifestyle of the people of the region with accurate and clear account.

Srutimala Duara is a translator and a bilingual writer, with published works both in English and Asomiya. Her Asomiya works include two books of rhymes, four collections of children's stories, a novel and a collection of short stories. Her English works include three major works *Travelling with Dreams* (2001), *Ashes in the Seas* (2003) and *Maya's Party* (2003). Her short stories collections include *The Sunset Hour* (1998), *Waiting for the Last Breath* (1999) and *The Jhoolan Evening* (2000).

The novel *Travelling with Dreams* is set in Assam, and depicts the terrorism prevalent in the state. The central character named Jibon is a hard core terrorist and the novel reveals the attitude of the society towards the terrorist organizations, the life of the people who are a part of

such organizations with a special focus on their sufferings and disillusionments. The novel further reveals 'the cry for the separate land' as a major issue influencing people like Jibon and inciting them to tread on the wrong path. The picture of terrorism in this region is clearly and sensitively projected by the writer. She illustrates the sufferings, troubles and disillusionment faced by the natives of this land with profound authenticity.

Another novel, by the same writer *Ashes in the Seas,* depicts the story of a woman who travels from Assam to South India. During her journey she recalls her past for which she is nostalgiC. Duara shows through her protagonist Smriti, how one is unable to forget the glitters of the past and have an aversion to the present which leaves one unaccompanied. She remembers the tranquility of her homeland which she felt in her earlier days and laments over the loss of its beauty and peace. Thus the novelist in both her novels depicts the sad tale of the North-Eastern people.

The distinct literary stream that flows from the area and has now entered into the main stream of Indian Literature, through the variegated strands of the North-Eastern society, which have been woven into stories in these novels, one gets a true picture of the region, On the one hand, it reflects the saga of trials and tribulations and, on the other, it showcases the unique history, culture and heritage of the multiple communities. Thus it would not be wrong to conclude that North-East region of India which has till a few decades ago remained under-represented due to the lack of literary output, has now started emerging out of the shadows drawing the attention of the intelligentsia. As Atreyee Gohain has emphatically expressed:

> The ignorance of the rest of the country regarding writers and writings in North-East is not just limited to Literature it is heartning now to see our writers getting their dues. We have good translators and publishers are just

about beginning to explore the richness of writing in the North East.[4]

Thus the rays of the North-Eastern literary Sun are now lightening up new horizons. The proposed study shall attempt to meet out the following objectives:

I. To trace out the ethnic, cultural, social and political milieus of the North-East India from the Pre-Independence era to the present time.

II. To probe into and analyze the distinctiveness of the literary trends of the region.

III. To mark out the specific features of the narratives as well as expose the pre occupation of the novelists with the trials and tribulations of their land.

IV. To make a comparative study of the recurrent as well as distinct features of the literary output of the selected novelists of the region.

To attain these objectives, the chapter-scheme of the study is proposed as:

- Chapter I – Introduction : (a)Various Dimensions of North- East India.
  (b) Brief Literary Survey.
- Chapter II – Crusade Against Oppression: Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Man from Chinnamasta.*
- Chapter III – Nostalgia And The Quest For Roots: Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* and *Surface*
- Chapter IV- Tryst With Insurgency: Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and *A Monsoon of the Music*

[4] Borpujari Utpal.*Reading North East.* February 13, 2011. Web. 13 September 2013. <utpalborpujari.wordpress.com/2011/02/13/reading-the-north-east>

- Chapter V – Radicalism and Displacement: Shrutimala Duara's *Travelling with Dreams* and *Ashes in the Seas.*
- The Summation.

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